

## LOCAL INSTABILITY SIGNATURES IN ALMA OBSERVATIONS OF DENSE GAS IN NGC 7469

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## ABSTRACT

We present an unprecedented measurement of the disc stability and local instability scales in the luminous infrared Seyfert 1 host, NGC 7469, based on ALMA observations of dense gas tracers and with a synthesized beam of  $165 \times 132$  pc. While we confirm that non-circular motions are not significant in redistributing the dense interstellar gas in this galaxy, we find compelling evidence that the dense gas is a suitable tracer for studying the origin of its intensely high-mass star forming ring-like structure. Our derived disc stability parameter  $Q$  accounts for a thick disc structure and its value falls below unity at the radii in which intense star formation is found. Furthermore, we derive the characteristic instability scale  $\lambda_c$  and find a striking agreement between our measured scale of  $\sim 180$  pc, and the typical sizes of individual complexes of young and massive star clusters seen in high-resolution images.

*Subject headings:* galaxies: ISM — galaxies: kinematics and dynamics — galaxies: individual (NGC 7469)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The central kpc region of the barred Seyfert 1 host NGC 7469 displays a number of morphological and kinematic features that provide interesting clues on the dynamical behaviour of the interstellar medium and its connection with star formation across the disc in this galaxy. Previous high resolution studies carried out by Meixner et al. (1990); Salamanca et al. (1995); Genzel et al. (1995); Davies et al. (2004, 2005) and Hicks et al. (2009) have shown that the gas rich central region displays intense star formation in a  $R \sim 0.5 - 1$  kpc ring-like structure contributing to up to 2/3 of the galaxy's bolometric luminosity ( $L_{\text{bol}} = 3 \times 10^{11} L_{\odot}$ ). The ring-like structure is dominated by young ( $< 100$  Myr) and massive ( $10^5 - 10^7 M_{\odot}$ ) super star clusters, with the enclosed mass of  $\sim 2.7 \times 10^9 M_{\odot}$  (Mauder et al. 1994; Díaz-Santos et al. 2007). The individual clusters are grouped in  $\sim 150 - 200$  pc-scale star forming complexes (Díaz-Santos et al. 2007). The relatively gas poor nuclear 30 – 60 pc region hosts a  $< 100$  Myr nuclear star cluster which contributes to 10% of the nuclear bolometric luminosity and 30% of the nuclear  $K$ -band continuum light. Furthermore, the intensities of the cold and warm molecular gas are consistent with a CO-to-H<sub>2</sub> conversion factor similar to other star forming galaxies, i.e.,  $X_{\text{CO}} = 0.4 - 0.8$  the conversion factor in the Milky Way (Davies et al. 2004; Bolatto et al. 2013).

The dynamics of the molecular gas around the nucleus is consistent with a thin disc model with  $\sim 10^8 M_{\odot}$  dynamical mass and  $\sim 3100 M_{\odot} \text{ pc}^{-2}$  surface density (Hicks et al. 2009). The stellar structure inside the nuclear 30 pc is dispersion dominated whereas the  $V/\sigma$  rapidly raises at this radius, staying consistently around unity out to  $\sim 150$  pc. Furthermore, Hicks & Malkan (2008) applied dynamical models to measure the mass of the central supermassive black hole to  $\sim 5 \times 10^7 M_{\odot}$ .

The molecular bar-like structure observed in CO maps taken with the IRAM millimeter interferometer on the Plateau de Bure shown no clear signatures of bar kinematics (Davies et al. 2004) and it does not have a counterpart in high resolution  $V$  or  $K$ -band images or radio continuum maps analyzed by Genzel et al. (1995); Mulchaey et al. (1997); Lai et al. (1999); Scoville et al. (2000) and Colina et al. (2001) (see also Fig. 1). Associating the molecular bar-like morphology with a non-axisymmetric perturbation raises the problem of locating the position of the intensely star-forming ring-like structure. With its dominant recent burst of star formation, it would be likely placed in, or near, an associated inner resonance radius (e.g., Regan & Teuben 2003; Piñol-Ferrer et al. 2014; Li et al. 2015).

Given that no significant kinematic characteristics of a barred potential has been found by Davies et al. (2004), it has been suggested that what appears to be a bar is

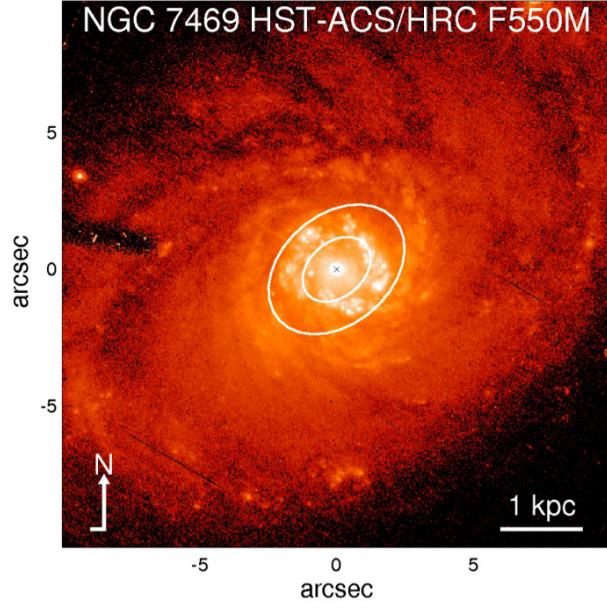


FIG. 1.— The central region of NGC 7469 with ellipses marking the 500 and 1000 pc boundaries in the plane of the galaxy disc.

likely a blending of gas clumps. Nevertheless, these authors assumed epicyclic approximation to associate the location of the ring-like structure with the inner Lindblad resonance radius of a primary bar, rotating at a pattern speed of  $< 80 \text{ km s}^{-1} \text{ kpc}^{-1}$ . Accordingly, the pattern speed for the region inside the ring was estimated to  $235 \pm 5 \text{ km s}^{-1} \text{ kpc}^{-1}$ . Congruent with this picture, the star-forming regions in NGC 7469 would be supported by its non-axisymmetric structure(s). However, strong bar/spiral-induced flows would be expected to sustain the large amounts of molecular gas (gas-to-dust ratio  $\sim 600$ ) with HCN  $J(4 \rightarrow 3)$ /CO  $J(3 \rightarrow 2) \sim 1$  (Papadopoulos et al. 2012).

While these results provide important clues on the fate of the interstellar gas in NGC 7469, a concise picture for the dynamical effects that trigger the intense star formation in this galaxy is missing. To build a realistic scenario for the relative role of the local and global instabilities that ignite these intense bursts of star formation in the central kpc radius of NGC 7469, we present here a detailed analysis of the distribution and kinematics of the densest phase of the molecular gas in the region of interest. We use the HCO<sup>+</sup>  $J(4 \rightarrow 3)$  and HCN  $J(4 \rightarrow 3)$  emission lines at high spatial and velocity resolution to derive the instability parameter and the characteristic wavenumbers that describe the local instability scales.

Throughout this work, we assume NGC 7469 to be at an inclination of 45° and a distance of 68 Mpc (de Vaucouleurs et al. 1991), implying 330 pc/'', and consistent with the above mentioned studies. The high angular resolution of Atacama Large Millimeter/sub-millimeter Array (ALMA) allows us to characterize the stability of the molecular gas throughout the central kpc region in this prototype luminous infrared galaxy. We show for the first time, that it is possible to directly quantify the stability criteria that lead to the star formation in the ring-like structure, accounting for up to 2/3 of the galaxy's bolometric luminosity.

## 2. OBSERVATIONS, MAPS, AND PROFILES

We observed NGC 7469 with ALMA on November 3rd and 4th, 2013, using 28 antennas in C32-2 configuration (Proposal ID 2012.1.00165.S, PI: Takuma Izumi). With 18'' primary beam size and  $0''.5 \times 0''.4$  synthesized beam size, sampled at  $0''.1 \text{ pixels}^{-1}$ , ALMA Band-7 receiver was tuned to cover the redshifted lines of HCN  $J(4 \rightarrow 3)$  ( $\nu_{\text{rest}} = 354.505 \text{ GHz}$ ) and HCO<sup>+</sup>  $J(4 \rightarrow 3)$  ( $\nu_{\text{rest}} = 356.734 \text{ GHz}$ ). The original velocity resolution was 0.43 km s<sup>-1</sup> but to achieve the amplitude-over-noise level  $\geq 2$ , we binned the data at an effective resolution of 20.2 km s<sup>-1</sup> (see Izumi et al. 2015a, for further details).

To derive the gas distribution and kinematic information, we applied single Gaussian fits to each individual spectrum in the data cube, keeping only the positive-amplitude fits. Comparison between Gaussian fitting results and conventional moment maps confirm that the line fluxes, line-of-sight velocities and velocity dispersions ( $\sigma$ ) as resulting from Gaussian fits are all reliable and fully consistent with the maps presented in Izumi et al. (2015a).

The difference is that our fitting scheme allows retrieving maps with a wider spatial coverage and recovering more extended emission, making our maps more suitable for the analysis of the gas kinematics. We further estimated the contribution of the side-lobes to  $< 15\%$  at  $R < 3''$ , hence not large enough to distort the derived kinematics (see Fig. 2). While the emission line amplitudes slightly vary for the different tracers, we note that their morphology remains unchanged.

Galactocentric flux and  $\sigma$  profiles are derived applying robust statistics, ensuring reliable results with up to 50% tolerance level. Moreover, the above estimated kinematics depend on the implicit assumption that the data comprise a random sample from a normal distribution. Noisy values or regions with stronger presence of a secondary component are thus accounted for by using robust statistics. Accordingly, we cut each two-dimensional map into projected circular galactocentric rings. At each radius (in the plane of the galaxy) we derive the median value for the flux and  $\sigma$ , followed by the error in the derived median values as described in Huber & Ronchetti (2009).

Numerous tests with varying ring widths and ring radii confirm that the exceptional quality and broad dynamical range of the ALMA data allows a stable median and error estimation even when median fluxes and  $\sigma$  values are derived at radii a factor two smaller than the synthesized beam size. The smallest reliable step is thus 0''.25, corresponding to an increment value of 82.5 pc, and this will be the step size adopted throughout the analysis presented here. Furthermore, the median velocity error across the field is 5.5 km s<sup>-1</sup>, and the median emission line amplitude error across the field is 0.06 mJy beam<sup>-1</sup> km s<sup>-1</sup>. All these parameters remain within the uncertainties both for the HCN and the HCO<sup>+</sup> lines.

At these radial steps, we also calculate the rotation curve by assuming that the circular rotation is the dominant kinematic feature and that our measurements refer to positions on a single inclined disk. We then use the method described in (e.g., Schoenmakers et al. 1997; Fathi et al. 2005; van de Ven & Fathi 2010) to derive the best representation of the rotation curve. Accordingly, the line-of-sight velocity is written as the harmonic se-

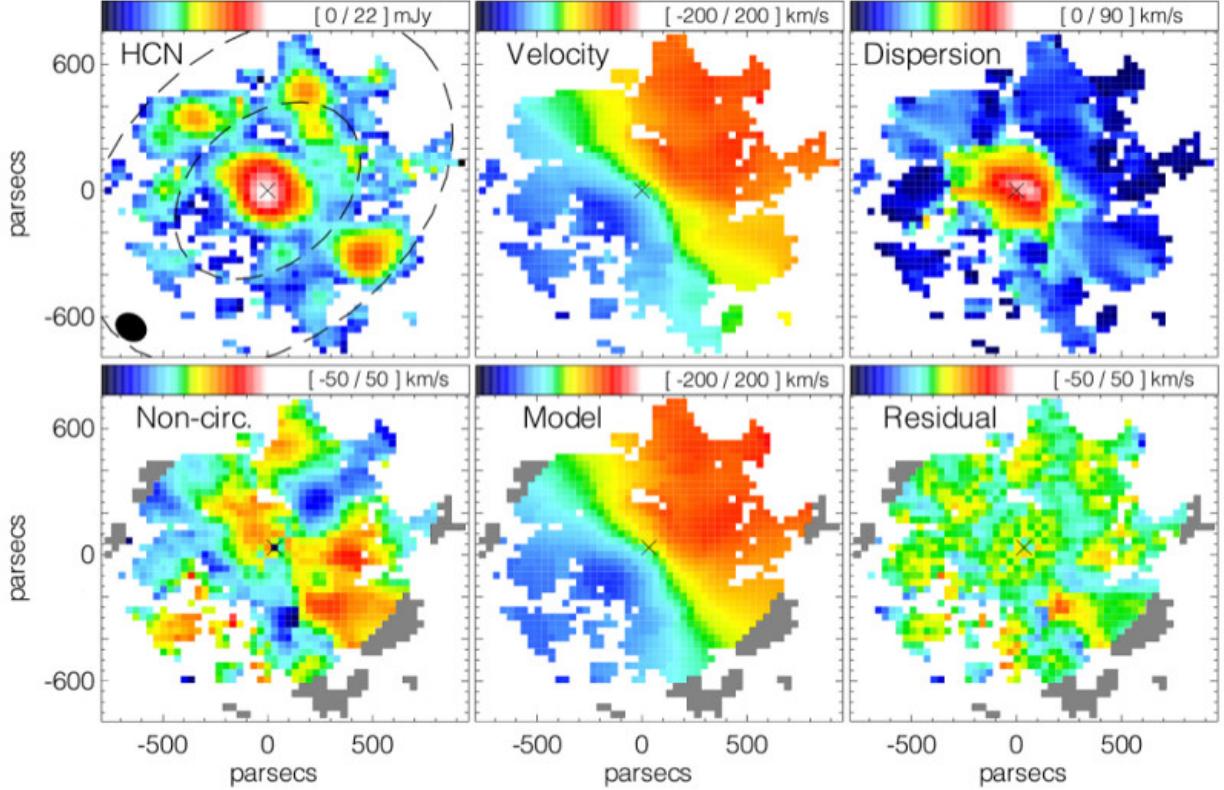


FIG. 2.— HCN  $J(4 \rightarrow 3)$  distribution and kinematics (top), and a representation of the noncircular velocities with a harmonic model to quantify their amplitudes and a final residual (data minus harmonic model) at the bottom row. The maps in the top row are results of single Gaussian fits to the individual spectra. The bottom left panel shows the marginal amplitudes of the non-circular motions which are results from the fit to the observed velocity field. The cross marks the position of the dynamical centre. The filled ellipse in the top left panel shows the synthesized beam size, and the dashed ellipses mark the ring-like structure at  $R \sim 500 - 1000$  pc. These maps remain consistent for the  $\text{HCO}^+ J(4 \rightarrow 3)$  tracer, but slightly noisier.

ries  $k_0(R) + \sum_{m=1}^n k_m(R) \cos(m[\psi - \psi_m(R)])$ , where  $k_0$  is the systemic velocity,  $k_1$  is the best fit circular velocity,  $R$  is the galactocentric radius,  $k_m|_{m>1}$  are higher order velocity amplitudes and  $\psi_m$  are phase shifts (see also van de Ven & Fathi 2010, and Fig. 3 here). Adopting  $45^\circ$  inclination, we find that the mean systemic velocity is  $4860$  km s $^{-1}$  and the kinematic position angle is  $132^\circ$ . Once the rotation curve is derived at each radius  $R$ , we calculate the angular frequency  $\Omega = k_1/R$  and the epicyclic frequency  $\kappa = \sqrt{R d\Omega^2/dR + 4\Omega^2}$  curves (see Fig. 3).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Rotation dominates the kinematics of the disc and our data show that both the HCN and the  $\text{HCO}^+$  lines trace the same dynamical entity. Henceforth, we use the HCN, which provides less noisy maps, to derive the dynamical properties of the dense interstellar component, associated with the high-mass star forming gas in this galaxy.

#### 3.1. Dynamical Mass

The low central  $V/\sigma$  ( $\sim 0.5$ ) found by Hicks et al. (2009) indicates that the random motions play a significant role in the central parts of NGC 7469. Our Fig. 3 also confirms that the random motions have to be accounted for when deriving the dynamical mass. We assume that the HCN  $\sigma$  rises due to symmetric macroscopic motions and we calculate the dynamical mass in the central kpc radius applying the equation  $M = R(k_1^2 + 3\sigma^2)/G$  (Bender et al. 1992), where  $R$  is

radius,  $k_1$  is the best representation of the rotation curve (as described above) and  $G$  is the gravitational constant (see Fig. 3). The mass curve shown in Fig. 3 is in full agreement with the measurements listed in Genzel et al.

(1995) and Hicks et al. (2009), and at the ring-like feature, our derived mass can encompass the combined masses for the star forming regions, as derived by Díaz-Santos et al. (2007).

#### 3.2. Surface Density of the Dense Gas Phase

Considering the narrow range of the critical densities and the similarity of the line shapes, it is reasonable to conclude that the HCN and  $\text{HCO}^+$  are both emitted from the same volume (Wada et al. 2009; Zhang et al. 2014), associated with the dense cores of star forming giant molecular clouds (Krips et al. 2008; Greve et al. 2009; Andrews & Thompson 2011). Modeling by Meijerink et al. (2007) and Kazandjian et al. (2012) determined the thermal and chemical balance in similar environments and found that the densities in these regions vary between  $10^4$  and  $10^6$  cm $^{-3}$ . In particular, where HCN/ $\text{HCO}^+$  ratio is greater than unity, the most likely number density is  $n_{(\text{H}_2)} \sim 10^5$  cm $^{-3}$ . NGC 7469 fulfills this criterion (Izumi et al. 2015a).

In Arp 220-like environments, Greve et al. (2009) found a wide range of kinetic temperatures  $T_k = 10 - 120$  K. Moderately star forming galaxies exhibit values closer to the lower end of this temperature range (e.g., Gao & Solomon 2004; Krips et al. 2008; Imanishi et al. 2010),

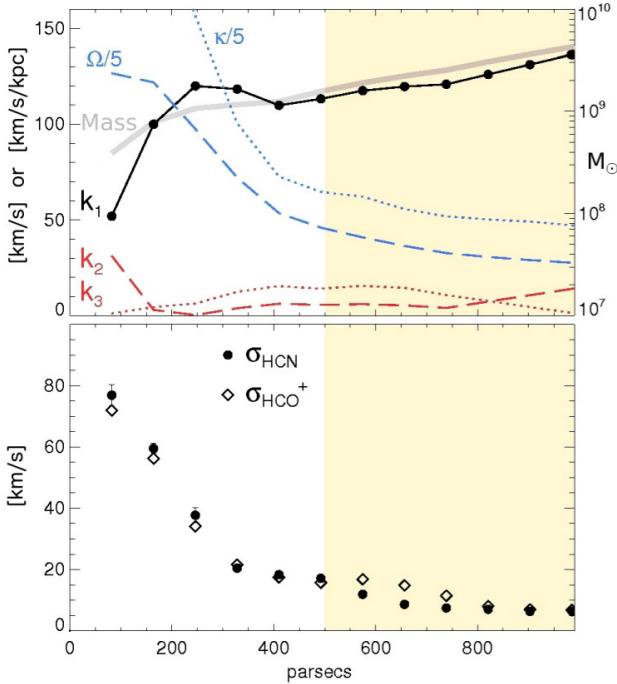


FIG. 3.— The one-dimensional profiles for the best fit rotation curve  $k_1$  and corresponding angular frequency  $\Omega$  and epicyclic frequency  $\kappa$ , and the non-circular motions up to and including the third order (top panel), all in the plane of the sky. Both frequency curves are defined in section 2 and they are here divided by five for illustration purposes. The dynamical mass (thick gray curve) accounts for the rotation curve, the HCN  $\sigma$  values shown in the bottom panel, and the assumed  $45^\circ$  inclination. The  $\text{HCO}^+$   $\sigma$  profile is shown in black diamonds. The shaded area marks the ring-like structure.

hence, we find it reasonable to assume  $T_k = 25$  K in NGC 7469.

Using the above density and temperature throughout the entire region studied here, we calculate the conversion factor  $X_{\text{HCN}} = 2.1 \times \sqrt{n_{(\text{H}_2)}}/T_b \sim 27 M_\odot (\text{K km s}^{-1} \text{pc}^2)^{-1}$  (Krips et al. 2008). Combined with the ratio  $\text{HCN } J(4 \rightarrow 3) / \text{HCN } J(1 \rightarrow 0) = 0.6$  (Viti et al. 2014) we convert the HCN flux into molecular gas surface density  $\Sigma$  (in  $M_\odot \text{ pc}^{-2}$ ). We note that the uncertainties in the density, temperature and  $\text{HCN } J(4 \rightarrow 3) / \text{HCN } J(1 \rightarrow 0)$  are large enough to dominate the uncertainties in the  $\Sigma$  values illustrated in Fig. 4. Both the  $\Sigma$  and disc stability parameter (as described in section 3.3) depend highly on the assumed temperature and number density. Decreasing the  $\text{HCN } J(4 \rightarrow 3) / \text{HCN } J(1 \rightarrow 0)$  will linearly increase the density values, while increasing the temperature will decrease the conversion factor.

Given that the active galactic nucleus in NGC 7469 only influences the inner  $< 40$  pc (Viti et al. 2014; Izumi et al. 2015b), our  $\Sigma$  curve is not affected by the corresponding radiation field. We further note that our measurements are prone to beam dilution up to a factor 5 (e.g., Sakamoto et al. 2011) and that this effect would translate into a similar level of underestimation of the  $\Sigma$ . Hence, we provide a rough estimate of the uncertainties for the  $\Sigma$  and subsequent stability parameter, using a factor 5 as upper value, and a factor two higher kinetic temperature (e.g., Scoville et al. 2015) as lower  $\Sigma$  limit (Fig. 4).

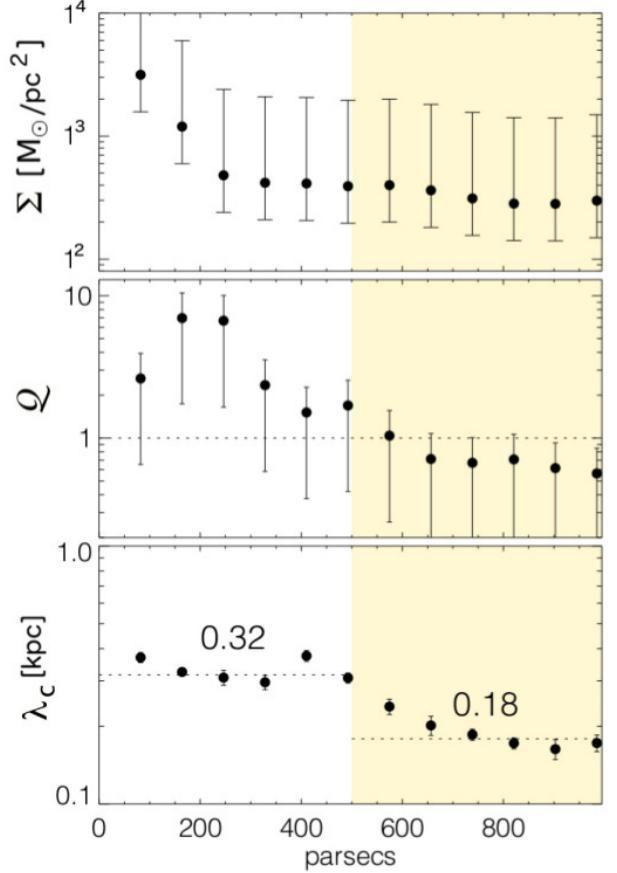


FIG. 4.— HCN surface density  $\Sigma$ , stability parameter  $Q$  and instability scale  $\lambda_c$  (top, middle and bottom panel, respectively). The two dashed lines in the bottom panel mark the median value within each region, as indicated. The shaded area marks the ring-like structure of intense star formation. The uncertainties in  $\Sigma$  (as described in section 3.2) are taken into account when deriving  $Q$  (see also section 3.3).

### 3.3. Disc Stability Analysis

To analyze the disc stability in the central  $R \sim 1$  kpc of NGC 7469, we assume that the velocity dispersion is isotropic and we derive the Toomre-like stability parameter  $Q$  for the HCN, taking into account also the disc thickness (Romeo & Wiegert 2011; Romeo & Falstad 2013). Accordingly,  $Q = 3\kappa\sigma/2\pi G\Sigma$ , where all the parameters are described above. Romeo & Wiegert (2011) have further shown that the dispersion relation for the stability parameter  $Q$  converges to Jeans dispersion relation. The middle panel of Fig. 4 illustrates that while the stability parameter  $Q$  is consistently above unity where no star formation is observed, this parameter decreases below unity at the region of the ring-like structure in NGC 7469. The corresponding error bars account for the uncertainties in the surface density  $\Sigma$  and the errors in the derived median  $\sigma$  values.

This is a strong result, since it shows that even the densest gas, which is likely sunk to the disk mid-plane (McKee & Ostriker 2007) and least prone to perturbations, is unstable in the ring-like structure. The instability gives rise to the intense formation of the high-mass young stars that have been reported in the literature (Díaz-Santos et al. 2007). Another interesting point here is that the HCN  $Q$  highlights the role

of local gravitational instabilities which lead to the intense star formation in this galaxy. Romeo & Fathi (2015) presented a detailed discussion on the physical phenomena that could contribute to the high  $Q$  at small radii. Moreover, while gas turbulence alters the condition for star-gas decoupling and increases the least stable wavelength, it hardly modifies the  $Q$  parameter at scales larger than about 100 pc (Hoffmann & Romeo 2012; Agertz et al. 2015). Given the metallicity of the central kpc radius of NGC 7469, it is possible that CO-dark molecular gas, anisotropy of the gas velocity dispersion and non-axisymmetric perturbations all contribute to the disc stability at  $R \lesssim 500$  pc region, by up to 50% or so. However, outside this radius, the low velocity dispersion of the HCN suggests that the contribution of the CO-dark gas and anisotropy may be marginal (Romeo & Fathi 2015). Furthermore, Sani et al. (2012) found that the Toomre parameter traced by HCN is above unity at the centre of other Seyfert galaxies.

The prescription of Romeo & Falstad (2013) further allows measuring the characteristic instability scale  $\lambda_c$ , i.e. the physical scales at which a realistically thick galactic disc becomes locally unstable as  $Q$  drops below unity. It is defined as  $\lambda_c = 2\pi\sigma/\kappa$  and deriving the scales for local perturbations does not exclude the role of global perturbation in reshaping the disc in NGC 7469. Indeed, a locally stable disc can still be globally unstable to bi-symmetric gravitational perturbations. Moreover, the dynamics and evolution of disc structures depend critically on the radial profile of the  $Q$  stability parameter (Romeo & Falstad 2013, and references therein).

The lower panel in Fig. 4 shows a marked difference between  $\lambda_c$  interior to and on the ring-like structure in NGC 7469. It is striking that in this region our measured  $\sim 180$  pc scale (median  $\lambda_c = 0.18$  kpc) is fully comparable to the measured sizes for the star forming complexes. The derived local instability scale for the densest gas is further supported by the observed young (5 – 6 Myr) and highly obscured ( $A_V \sim 10$  mag) population of stars that coexist with an intermediate age (15 – 35 Myr) less extincted population (Díaz-Santos et al. 2007). The young and massive population accounts for  $\sim 1/3$  of the total stellar mass and up to  $2/3$  of the infrared luminosity in the ring-like structure (Díaz-Santos et al. 2007).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Studies of star formation in discs suggest that massive stars are predominantly formed in the densest cores of giant molecular clouds (e.g., Krumholz 2014), hence it is commonly assumed that HCN and  $\text{HCO}^+$  trace these dense cores (Wu et al. 2005; Lada et al. 2012). Due to the high critical densities, a tighter correlation is found between the intensities of these molecules and the far

infrared emission (Gao & Solomon 2004). This correlation further extends to dense cores undergoing high mass star-formation (Lada et al. 2012; Zhang et al. 2014).

The galactic scale intense star formation in NGC 7469 is likely due to the combination of a past interaction with the neighboring IC 5283 and the presence of its bar or spiral arms. However, the expected non-circular motions are not detected in our ALMA kinematic maps for this galaxy (c.f. Fathi et al. 2005, 2006, 2013). Our ALMA observations of  $\text{HCN } J(4 \rightarrow 3)$  and  $\text{HCO}^+ J(4 \rightarrow 3)$  lines reveal a number of interesting clues on how local gravitational instabilities help forming stars in this galaxy.

We derive the radial profiles for the disc stability parameter  $Q$  and the characteristic instability scale  $\lambda_c$  in NGC 7469. We find signatures of disc instability on the ring-like structure, inside which, the disc is stable against star formation. At the highly star forming ring-like structure, the median local instability scale is  $\sim 180$  pc, in full agreement with the sizes of individual star forming complexes seen in Hubble Space Telescope images. Our stability analysis accounts for a disc structure with finite thickness, and as discussed in Romeo & Fathi (2015) and Agertz et al. (2015), turbulence could alter the condition for star-gas decoupling and increases the least stable wavelength, but hardly modifies the stability parameter  $Q$  at scales larger than about 100 pc.

Our robust results further show that short-wavelength approximation is satisfied in the region studied here and that the ring-like structure could in essence be only a tightening of the galactic-scale non-axisymmetric spiral arms. It will be interesting to apply this analysis to the warmer, less dense and more diffuse CO gas, however, as it was pointed out by Romeo & Falstad (2013) such a comparison must be based on identical data quality and resolution. At the moment we have no CO data at hand that match the resolution, sensitivity, and spatial coverage of the ALMA observations analyzed here.

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